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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000155

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: REO BASRAH SUPPORT FOR PRIVATE MEDIA IN THE RUN-UP TO THE DECEMBER 15 ELECTION

¶1. Summary. REO Basrah programmed \$145,000 in public diplomacy grant funds to media organizations for coverage of key election issues in the run-up to the December 15 national election. Al-Samawah, Al-Manarah, Shatt Al-Arab, Al-Haqeeqa and Basrah Politics newspapers and Radio Shinashel each received between \$10,000 to \$15,000 grants, resulting in hundreds of hours of extra radio programming and over 190,000 supplemental editions being published and distributed in nine southern provinces. Between the five newspapers and the one radio station, thousands of voters scattered among all the southern provinces were reached. End Summary.

¶2. REO Basrah programmed \$145,000 in Embassy Baghdad Public Diplomacy grant funds to local and regional media organizations to highlight important issues preceding the December 15 election. The goals of the program were to assist local and regional newspapers to highlight key issues and profile candidates and political lists for the overarching aim of providing voters with a better understanding of the electoral process.

¶3. Al-Haqeeqa, Shatt Al-Arab, Al-Samawah and Basrah Politics newspapers used grant funds to support the publishing of eight-page special editions twice a week in advance of the elections, for a total of six extra editions. The editors of these papers made special efforts to provide balanced coverage of both Unified Iraqi Coalition (List 555) candidates and their opponents, placing specific emphasis on women's rights and the role of women in the election. Al-Samawah newspaper from Muthanna province, in particular, devoted equal space for conservative and moderate candidates, including several two-page, fold out sections that profiled one candidate on the left page and another on the right.

¶4. Al-Manarah, the only regularly published newspaper in the south (twice weekly), provided three separate products. First, it developed and inserted an eight-page election supplement into its regularly published biweekly newspaper and distributed it to 10,000 Iraqis throughout the south. This supplement was designed to provide readers with an overview of candidates and their platforms, as well as general election issues in the south. Second, Al-Manarah published two special provincial editions in each of the nine southern provinces, one before and another after the election. These provincial editions focused on issues and candidates in their respective provinces. Al-Manarah distributed 3,000 copies of each edition in each province. Finally, two days before the election, Al-Manarah published and distributed a special election primer edition, with 3,000 copies distributed in eight southern provinces and 10,000 distributed in Basrah province. This special edition was designed to be an election day tool for voters, identifying all of the candidates on each list and describing each list's basic platform.

Media Reaction

¶5. Vignettes from special election editions and supplements:

Al Haqeeqa (Basrah), Communist, summary of front-page editorial by Abbas Al-Jourani on December 7, titled, "Terrorism and the Electoral Campaigns."

"Any participant in the electoral process can not deny the important steps that the Iraqi people have taken to remove the remnants of Saddam's regime. Unfortunately, during the legal campaigns, we have observed the tearing of posters and pictures of candidates, a result of the lack of democratic education of the people. This is a blemish on the political process and I call on all parties to condemn this action."

Shatt Al-Arab (Basrah), Independent, summary of front-page editorial by Bakr Al-Nimrawee on December 3, titled, "Let's make the election the beginning of the end of the occupation."

"In order to build a new independent, democratic Iraq and free ourselves from occupation, we must adopt the following national goals and principles:

- Be loyal to an Iraqi identity first, rather than a doctrine, or ethnic/sectarian affiliation.
- Cast away religious and political extremism.
- Embrace the democratic process

-- Invite all elements of Iraqi society to be involved in electoral process, regardless of affiliation.
-- Maintain the unity of Iraq by ensuring that all parties receive a fair share of the nation's natural resources.

We know that by adhering to the principles spelled out above, we can ensure that our democracy grows strong and results in the withdrawal of coalition forces."

Al-Samawah (Muthanna), Independent, summary of third page unattributed editorial on November 26, titled, "People Chatting Before the Parliamentary Elections."

"The Iraqi people have a proud and storied civilization and culture and we will soon return to that place we occupied long ago. They have started to build a new Iraq step by step and now they will choose their candidates to write down the permanent constitution and apply it as well. Here show some of the opinions of the people and what the election means to them:

--Waleed Mazher - Researcher

The parliamentary election is coming soon and the people hope for lots of change for the coming government because it's the first time an elected government will lead the country for four years.

--Ali Adnan - Student

The Election is the foundation to build a new Iraq and every one should express his own opinion and show what he can do for Iraq.

--Maysoon Al-Shaik:

The most important thing is increasing the participation of women in government.

I think the women will have a strong showing in the coming election.

--Maraim Al-Halfy:

The Election is the right step on the way to a new strong Iraq to survive this critical period and achieve a stable Iraq that provides for the aspirations of the candidates and the people."

16. Summary: Communicating election issues to the widespread population in the southern provinces is a challenge for the small, poorly-funded private media organizations in the south. The \$145,000 in grant funds enabled private media to spread information about the December 15 national elections at a critical time in Iraq's history. End Summary.

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